

VZCZCXYZ0025
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHFRA #2405 1581444
ZNY CCCCC ZZH ZUI RUEWMCE0326 1581420
O 071444Z JUN 07
FM AMEMBASSY PARIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0000
INFO ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK

C O N F I D E N T I A L PARIS 002405

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 6/6/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [FR](#) [LE](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: MFA MIDDLE EAST CHIEF: A MIDDLE EAST LANDSCAPE IN
THREE SHADES OF GLUM

CLASSIFIED BY: POLITICAL MINISTER-COUNSELOR JOSIAH ROSENBLATT, REASONS
1.4 (B) AND (D).

PAGE 02 RUEHFRA2405 C O N F I D E N T I A L

1. (C) SUMMARY: ON JUNE 6, JEAN FELIX-PAGAGNON, DIRECTOR OF THE MFA'S MIDDLE EAST BUREAU, PAINTED A RELENTLESSLY DEPRESSING TABLEAU OF THE MIDDLE EAST. AGAINST THIS BACKGROUND, HE TRACED PRESIDENT SARKOZY'S PRIORITIES, BEGINNING WITH NORTH AFRICA (VITAL TO SARKOZY'S PLANS TO RESHAPE FRANCES IMMIGRATION POLICY), FOLLOWED BY THE PERSIAN GULF, AND LAST BUT NOT LEAST RELATIONS WITH LEBANON AND EGYPT. HE SUGGESTED FRANCE WOULD DO LITTLE MORE THAN PAY LIP SERVICE TO THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT, WHERE HE SAW PROSPECTS FOR A TWO-STATE SOLUTION AS RAPIDLY DISAPPEARING. AS FOR FOREIGN MINISTER KOUCHNER'S PROPOSAL TO HOST A LEBANESE NATIONAL DIALOGUE IN FRANCE, FELIX-PAGAGNON SAID THE IDEA WAS TO HOLD AN "INFORMAL" MEETING CONVENED BY KOUCHNER IN "HIS PERSONAL CAPACITY." FELIX-PAGAGNON CONFIRMED THAT THE FRENCH WILL LIKELY SEND AN ENVOY TO DAMASCUS IN LATE JUNE OR EARLY JULY (BARRING NEW EVIDENCE OF SYRIAN MISBEHAVIOR IN LEBANON, NAHR EL-BARED NOT INCLUDED). HE ADDED THAT FRANCE INTENDS TO MAINTAIN A DIALOGUE ON LEBANON WITH IRAN, AND WILL ALSO OPEN DISCREET CONTACTS WITH HIZBALLAH. BUT FELIX-PAGAGNON DOWNPLAYED THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THESE POLICY

PAGE 03 RUEHFRA2405 C O N F I D E N T I A L

MOVES. HE SUGGESTED AN EXCHANGE OF INTELLIGENCE REGARDING SYRIAN SUPPORT FOR SUNNI EXTREMIST GROUPS OPERATING IN LEBANON, AND PROMISED CONTINUED CLOSE COOPERATION WITH US ON LEBANON/SYRIA. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) IN A JUNE 6 MEETING WITH POLMINCOUNS AND NEA WATCHER, JEAN FELIX-PAGAGNON, DIRECTOR OF THE MFAS MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA DIVISION (I.E., NEA A/S-EQUIVALENT), PAINTED A CHARACTERISTICALLY SOMBER REGIONAL LANDSCAPE, BRIGHTENED ONLY BY OCCASIONAL SPLASHES OF CHEERFUL CYNICISM. AMONG THE LEAST DEPRESSING OF HIS COMMENTS WAS HIS SUCCINCT DESCRIPTION OF PRESIDENT SARKOZY'S REGIONAL PRIORITIES. THE MOST IMPORTANT OF THESE IS NORTH AFRICA, GIVEN SARKOZY'S FOCUS ON REFORMING FRENCH IMMIGRATION POLICY AND ON EXPANDING TRADE AND SOCIAL TIES IN THE WESTERN MEDITERRANEAN. NEXT COME RELATIONS WITH THE OIL-RICH PERSIAN GULF STATES, FOR OBVIOUS MERCANTILE REASONS. IN THIRD PLACE ARE FRANCE'S RELATIONS WITH LEBANON AND EGYPT, GIVEN STRONG HISTORICAL TIES WITH THESE COUNTRIES.

13. (C) IF THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT APPEARED CONSPICUOUSLY ABSENT FROM THIS LIST, IT WAS NOT BY ACCIDENT. "I DON'T FORESEE ANY (FRENCH) INITIATIVES, JUST CONFLICT FATIGUE," SAID FELIX-PAGAGNON, WHO PREDICTED THAT FRANCE WOULD LIMIT ITSELF TO MAINTAINING POLITE, EVEN WARM, RELATIONS WITH THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY (PA) AND ISRAEL. THIS SELF-CIRCUMSCRIPTION SEEMED TO FLOW FROM A BELIEF THAT THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY'S LUKEWARM SUPPORT OF THE PA'S NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT (NUG) HAS ONLY SERVED TO "STRENGTHEN THE (PALESTINIAN) EXTREMISTS WHILE WEAKENING THE MODERATES." THE RESULT IS "CATASTROPHIC . . . THE TWO-STATE SOLUTION IS DISAPPEARING."

14. (C) CONSEQUENTLY, ONE SHOULD NOT EXPECT MUCH TO COME OF PA PRESIDENT MAHMOUD ABBAS' VISIT TO PARIS LATER THIS MONTH, SAID FELIX-PAGAGNON. HE PREDICTED THE VISIT WOULD CONSIST OF NO MORE THAN "A LUNCH WITH SARKOZY, A MEETING WITH KOUCHNER,

PAGE 05 RUEHFRA2405 C O N F I D E N T I A L
THANKS AND GOOD-BYE."

15. (C) STRIKING A HERETICAL NOTE FOR A FRENCH DIPLOMAT, FELIX-PAGAGNON SAID THAT IN ANY EVENT, AFTER 30 YEARS OF WORKING ON MIDDLE EAST ISSUES HE SERIOUSLY DOUBTED THE CONFLICT'S CENTRALITY TO THE REGION'S TROUBLES. "IF THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT WERE MIRACULOUSLY SOLVED TOMORROW, WOULD THAT SOLVE THE CONFLICT IN IRAQ? DARFUR? SOMALIA? LEBANON? WESTERN SAHARA?" HE ASKED RHETORICALLY.

LEBANON

16. (C) THE VETERAN FRENCH DIPLOMAT REACTED TEPIDLY TO OUR CONGRATULATIONS ON THE PASSAGE OF UNSCR 1757. "I'M NOT SURE CONGRATULATIONS ARE IN ORDER," HE SAID WITH A LISTLESS SHRUG OF HIS SHOULDERS, ADDING THAT IT WAS NOT YET CLEAR WHETHER THE RESOLUTION'S PASSAGE WOULD FACILITATE AN END TO LEBANON'S POLITICAL CRISIS OR BE ANSWERED BY SYRIAN ATTEMPTS AT VENGEANCE. MOREOVER, HE CONCEDED THAT SARKOZY'S ADVISORS

PAGE 06 RUEHFRA2405 C O N F I D E N T I A L
WERE "REFLECTING" IN THE AFTERMATH OF UNSCR 1757. WHEREAS PRESIDENT CHIRAC MIGHT HAVE RESPONDED TO 1757'S PASSAGE BY INSTANTLY FOCUSING ON HOW TO HELP MARCH 14 ACHIEVE VICTORY IN LEBANON'S UPCOMING PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, THE NEW GOVERNMENT HAS NO SUCH FOCUS. "NO ONE IN SARKOZY'S GOVERNMENT IS SAYING THAT WE SHOULD GO FOR A TRIPLE SWEEP: THE TRIBUNAL, THE

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, AND THEN THE CREATION OF A NEW CABINET," SAID FELIX-PAGAGNON. INSTEAD, THE FRENCH HOPE TO LEVERAGE UNSCR 1757 INTO AN OPPORTUNITY FOR RAPPROCHEMENT

PAGE 02 RUEHFRA2405 C O N F I D E N T I A L
BETWEEN LEBANON'S VARIOUS FACTIONS. IN ADDITION, THE FRENCH BELIEVE NOW IS AN OPPORTUNE TIME TO BEGIN A DIALOGUE WITH IRAN AND SYRIA.

17. (C) PRESSED FOR DETAILS ON FM KOUCHNER'S PROPOSAL TO HOLD A LEBANESE NATIONAL DIALOGUE IN FRANCE, FELIX-PAGAGNON SAID KOUCHNER INTENDED TO CONVENE "AN INFORMAL MEETING" OF LEBANON'S POLITICAL LEADERS (INCLUDING AOUN) IN "HIS PERSONAL CAPACITY" RATHER THAN AS FRANCE'S FOREIGN MINISTER. TO PREVENT THE MEETING FROM BEING "INSTITUTIONAL," THERE WOULD BE NO AGENDA, AND KOUCHNER WOULD NOT UNVEIL ANY FRENCH PROPOSALS. RATHER, THE MEETING WOULD BE AN EXERCISE IN GROUP THERAPY, WITH PARTICIPANTS VENTING THEIR RESPECTIVE POSITIONS

IN THE HOPE THAT COMMON GROUND WOULD EVENTUALLY EMERGE. "IF WE CAN KEEP THEM ALL IN THE SAME ROOM TOGETHER TALKING FOR 48 HOURS, THAT WOULD BE A GREAT SUCCESS IN AND OF ITSELF," FELIX-PAGAGNON CLAIMED. HE PROMISED TO KEEP THE USG INFORMED OF FRANCE'S THINKING AS PLANS FOR THE DIALOGUE SOLIDIFIED.

MICHEL AOUN

PAGE 03 RUEHFRA2405 C O N F I D E N T I A L

18. (C) FELIX-PAGAGNON ADMITTED THAT HE WAS STUMPED BY THE PROBLEM OF HOW TO HANDLE LEBANESE OPPOSITION LEADER MICHEL AOUN, WHO MET TWICE WITH FM KOUCHNER LAST WEEK. AOUN'S MESSAGE TO KOUCHNER WAS: "I AM THE ONLY TRUE CHAMPION OF LEBANON'S SOVEREIGNTY, AND I WILL EITHER BECOME PRESIDENT OR BLOCK THE SYSTEM COMPLETELY." AOUN ADDED THAT HE WAS PREPARED TO EMBRACE ANY TACTIC THAT MIGHT HELP HIM GAIN THE PRESIDENCY, INCLUDING PRESIDENT LAHOUD'S APPOINTMENT OF AN ALTERNATIVE GOVERNMENT. THE IRONY, ACCORDING TO FELIX-PAGAGNON, IS THAT NEITHER SYRIA NOR HIZBALLAH HAVE ANY INTENTION OF ALLOWING AOUN TO BECOME PRESIDENT. "HE'S EVERYTHING THEY FEAR IN A MARONITE PRESIDENT -- STRONG, UNPREDICTABLE, UNCONTROLLABLE," SAID THE FRENCH DIPLOMAT.

19. (C) THOUGH TROUBLED BY THE EX-GENERAL'S INTRANSIGENCE, THE QUAI SEEMS RESIGNED TO THE NEED TO WORK WITH AOUN. "WE MUST RECOGNIZE THE REALITY OF THE SITUATION. HE IS THE ONLY POPULAR CHRISTIAN LEADER . . . WE ESTIMATE HE HAS THE SUPPORT

PAGE 04 RUEHFRA2405 C O N F I D E N T I A L
OF AT LEAST 50 PERCENT OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY," SAID FELIX-PAGAGNON.

SYRIA/HIZBALLAH/IRAN

110. (C) ON SYRIA, FELIX-PAGAGNON CONFIRMED THAT THE FRENCH STILL INTEND TO SEND AN ENVOY TO DAMASCUS IN LATE JUNE OR EARLY JULY PROVIDED THAT SYRIA DOES NOT SPONSOR ANY FRESH BOUT OF LEBANESE VIOLENCE IN THE INTERIM. (ALTHOUGH HE ADMITTED TO SUSPECTING DAMASCUS OF SUPPORTING FATAH EL-ISLAM, FELIX-PAGAGNON SEEMED INCLINED TO GIVE THE SYRIANS A PASS ON THE SITUATION IN NAHR EL-BARED. HE DID, HOWEVER, EXPRESS INTEREST IN EXCHANGING INTELLIGENCE WITH THE USG ON SYRIAN TIES TO SUNNI MILITANT GROUPS OPERATING IN THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS.) THE FRENCH HAVE NOT YET DECIDED ON THE IDENTITY OF THE ENVOY OR THE MODALITIES FOR HIS OR HER VISIT (ALTHOUGH ONE RUMOR CIRCULATING IN PARIS IS THAT FELIX-PAGAGNON HIMSELF WILL BE THE ENVOY).

PAGE 05 RUEHFRA2405 C O N F I D E N T I A L

111. (C) ASKED ABOUT FORMER LEBANESE AGRICULTURE MINISTER TRAD HAMMADI (HIZBALLAH), WHO REPORTEDLY REQUESTED A MEETING AT THE QUAI THIS WEEK AND THEN CANCELED HIS REQUEST UPON INSTRUCTIONS FROM THE HIZBALLAH LEADERSHIP, FELIX-PAGAGNON SAID THAT THE FRENCH WOULD FIND A DISCREET WAY TO OPEN CONTACT WITH HIM. AS FOR THE IRANIANS, FELIX-PAGAGNON (WHO TRAVELED TO TEHRAN IN THE LAST DAYS OF THE CHIRAC PRESIDENCY TO DISCUSS LEBANON) SAID HE BELIEVES THAT IRAN'S LEADERS ARE WARY OF LEBANON'S POTENTIAL TO SPARK A BROADER SUNNI-SHIITE CONFLICT IN THE REGION.

WESTERN SAHARA

112. (C) FELIX-PAGAGNON WAS SKEPTICAL OF UPCOMING TALKS BETWEEN MOROCCO AND THE POLISARIO TO RESOLVE THE WESTERN SAHARA CONFLICT. HE PREDICTED THAT MOROCCO WOULD STACK ITS DELEGATION WITH CORCAS MEMBERS WITH WHOM THE POLISARIO DELEGATION WOULD REFUSE TO TALK. THIS WOULD SUIT THE

MOROCCANS, WHO SEE THEIR GRIP ON THE WESTERN SAHARA BEING

PAGE 06 RUEHFRA2405 C O N F I D E N T I A L
STRENGTHENED BY THE STATUS QUO. AS FOR THE ALGERIANS,
FELIX-PAGAGNON SAID THAT WHILE A MAJOR CHANGE IN ALGERIA'S
ATTITUDE TOWARD RABAT MIGHT OCCUR SOMEDAY, IT WILL NOT BE ON
PRESIDENT BOUTEFLIKA'S WATCH. "PERHAPS THE NEXT GENERATION,"
WAS FELIX-PAGAGNON'S VERDICT.

¶13. (C) COMMENT: THOUGH HE IS SKILLED IN PROJECTING THE
IMPRESSION OF CANDOR, WE CAME AWAY FROM OUR DISCUSSION WITH
THE SENSE THAT BY PAINTING THE REGION IN SUCH SOMBER HUES,

PAGE 02 RUEHFRA2405 C O N F I D E N T I A L
FELIX-PAGAGNON SOUGHT TO OBSCURE THE IMPORTANCE OF THE
CHANGES UNDERWAY IN FRANCE'S LEBANON/SYRIA POLICY. AS FOR
THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT, WE ARE NOT PERSUADED THAT
SARKOZY WILL BE CONTENT TO FIDDLE WHILE GAZA BURNS. WHILE IT
MAY BE TRUE THAT FRANCE WILL NOT UNVEIL ANY MAJOR NEW
INITIATIVES IN THE NEAR FUTURE, A FRENCH APPROACH MORE
CONSONANT WITH EU AND QUARTET POSITIONS WOULD NOT BE SUCH A
BAD ALTERNATIVE. WE NOTE, FOR EXAMPLE, THAT FELIX-PAGAGNON
SEEMED UNCERTAIN HOW VIGOROUSLY THE NEW PRESIDENCY WOULD
PURSUE THE QUESTION OF PROVIDING DIRECT FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE
TO THE NUG -- WHICH MAY SUGGEST THAT SARKOZY IS LESS
INTERESTED THAN CHIRAC IN TRYING TO BUCK THE EU CONSENSUS ON
THAT POINT.

PLEASE VISIT PARIS' CLASSIFIED WEBSITE AT:
[HTTP://WWW.STATE.SGOV.GOV/P/EUR/PARIS/INDEX.C FM](http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/paris/index.cfm)

PAGE 03 RUEHFRA2405 C O N F I D E N T I A L

STAPLETON